

# Executive Summary from ADULT LITERACY in California

Results of the  
National Adult Literacy Survey

Lynn B. Jenkins and Irwin S. Kirsch



Table B3.14: Reasons for high school noncompletion among states born in the United States and foreignborn

Reason	States Born	Foreignborn
Not enough money	18%	22%
Not enough time	12%	15%
Not enough ability	10%	12%
Not enough interest	8%	10%
Not enough motivation	7%	9%
Not enough information	6%	8%
Not enough support	5%	7%
Not enough encouragement	4%	6%
Not enough help	3%	5%
Not enough guidance	2%	4%
Not enough direction	1%	3%

Why Do We Need to Literate?

The text on this page discusses the importance of literacy for individuals and society. It highlights the challenges faced by illiterate adults and the need for educational programs to improve their skills. The text is presented in a clear, readable font on a white background with an orange border.



MAY 1994

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *Adult Literacy in California*

This executive summary presents a portrait of adult literacy in California based on the results of the State Adult Literacy Survey, an important research project in which twelve states assessed the literacy skills of their adult populations. The project, conducted in 1992, is a component of the National Adult Literacy Survey, a large-scale study funded by the U.S. Department of Education and administered by Educational Testing Service.

Many past studies of adult literacy have tried to count the number of “illiterates” in this nation, thereby treating literacy as a condition that individuals either do or do not have. We believe that such efforts are inherently arbitrary and misleading. They are also damaging, in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.

The California State Adult Literacy Survey, like the National Adult Literacy Survey of which it is a part, is based on a different definition of literacy and therefore follows a different approach to measuring it. The aim of this survey is to characterize adults’ literacy skills in English based on their performance on diverse tasks that reflect the types of materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives.

To gather information on the literacy skills of adults in California, trained staff interviewed selected individuals age 16 and older during the first eight months of 1992. These participants were randomly chosen to represent the adult population in the state as a whole. In total, 2,665 adults in California were surveyed, representing approximately 22.8 million adults statewide.

Each survey participant was asked to spend approximately an hour responding to a series of varied literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, employment, income, reading practices, and other areas related to literacy. Based on their responses to the survey tasks, adults received proficiency scores along three scales, each ranging from 0 to 500. The score points along these scales reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. To provide a way to examine the distribution of performance within various subpopulations of interest, five levels of proficiency were defined along each scale: Level 1 (0 to 225), Level 2 (226 to 275), Level 3 (276 to 325), Level 4 (326 to 375), and Level 5 (376 to 500).

The full report offers a comprehensive look at the results of the California survey. It describes the average literacy proficiencies and the levels of proficiency demonstrated by adults in this state, compared with individuals in the region and nation, and explores connections between literacy and an array of variables. Some of the major findings are highlighted in the pages that follow.

### **Profiles of Adult Literacy in California**

- Adults in California had average scores of 270 on the prose scale, 263 on the document scale, and 269 on the quantitative scale. These proficiencies were 6 to 8 points lower than those of adults living in the West, but comparable to those of adults nationwide. In all three populations—the state, region, and nation—average scores were in the Level 2 range (226 to 275).
- Twenty-four to 26 percent of the respondents in California demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies (Level 1). Though all adults in this level displayed limited skills, their characteristics are diverse. Many adults in this level were successful in performing simple, routine tasks involving brief and uncomplicated texts and documents. For example, they were able to total the entries on a deposit slip, locate the time or place of a meeting on a form, and identify a piece of specific information in a brief news article. Others did not perform these types of tasks successfully, however, and some had such limited skills that they were unable to respond to much of the survey.
- The composition of the Level 1 population differs in some important respects from the state population as a whole. For example, 59 percent of the California residents who performed in Level 1 on the prose literacy scale were foreign-born, compared with 24 percent of the entire state

population. Further, individuals in the lowest level of quantitative literacy were much less likely (34 percent) than those in the state population as a whole (73 percent) to have completed high school or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or to have attended a postsecondary institution.

- Twenty-two to 25 percent of the California respondents performed in the next higher level of proficiency (Level 2) on each literacy scale. While their skills were more varied than those of individuals in Level 1, their repertoires were still quite limited. They were generally able to locate information in text, to make low-level inferences using printed materials, and to integrate easily identifiable pieces of information. Further, they demonstrated the ability to perform quantitative tasks that involve a single operation where the numbers are either stated or can be easily found in text. For example, adults in this level were able to calculate the total cost of a purchase or determine the difference in price between two items. They could also locate a particular intersection on a street map and enter background information on a simple form.

Individuals in Levels 1 and 2 were sometimes, but not consistently, able to respond correctly to the more challenging literacy tasks in the assessment—those requiring higher-level reading and problem-solving skills. In particular, they appeared to have considerable difficulty with tasks that required them to integrate or synthesize information from complex or lengthy texts or to perform quantitative tasks in which the individual had to set up the problem and then carry out two or more sequential operations.

- Thirty percent of the survey participants in California performed in Level 3 on each literacy scale. Respondents with skills in this level on the prose and document scales integrated information from relatively long or dense text or from documents. Those in Level 3 on the quantitative scale demonstrated an ability to determine the appropriate arithmetic operation based on information contained in the directive, and to identify the quantities needed to perform that operation.
- Seventeen to 19 percent of the respondents in California scored in the fourth level of prose, document, and quantitative literacy, and 3 to 5 percent attained the highest level. These adults consistently demonstrated the ability to perform the most challenging tasks in this assessment, many of which involved long and complex documents and text passages.
- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. On the prose scale, for example, average scores rise from 265 among 16- to 18-year-olds in California to 293 among 45- to 54-year-olds before declining across the older age groups.
- About three-quarters of the adults in California (76 percent) were born in the United States or one of its territories. These individuals performed far better in the assessment, on average, than foreign-born individuals. Across the literacy scales, between 56 and 59 percent of the California residents who were born in other countries demonstrated skills in Level 1, compared with 13 to 16 percent of the native-born residents.
- There were no statistically significant differences in literacy proficiency between foreign-born California residents who have lived in the United States for one to five years and those who have lived here for six to 10 years. In all three dimensions of literacy, however, foreign-born adults in California who have lived in this country for more than 10 years had higher average proficiencies than those who have lived here for fewer years.
- African American and Latino adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the lowest literacy level and less likely to attain the two highest levels. Forty-one percent of the Latino adults in California were born in this country, and their average proficiencies were comparable to those of native-born African American adults.

- Slightly more than half the adults in California (53 percent) reported having lived in the state for more than 20 years. Across the literacy scales these individuals tended to display higher proficiencies than adults who had lived in California for fewer years. Thirteen percent of the survey respondents in the state reported that it was likely they would move out of the state within five years.
- California residents who reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work or other activities were more likely than adults without such conditions to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and less likely to reach the highest levels.
- The average prose and document proficiencies of men and women in California did not differ, but men had higher average quantitative proficiencies than women.

### **Education and Training**

- Average literacy proficiencies rise steadily across the entire range of education levels. California residents with relatively few years of education were more likely to perform in the lower literacy levels than those who had completed high school or some postsecondary education.
- Differences in the average years of schooling completed by adults in various subpopulations tend to parallel the observed differences in literacy proficiencies. Older adults in California had completed less schooling, on average, than adults in other age groups (11 years, compared with 12 years or more, respectively). White adults had completed more schooling, on average (13.5 years), than African American (12.5 years) and Latino adults (9.5 years). Adults born in the United States had finished more years of schooling (13 years, on average) than those born abroad (8 years).
- Foreign-born adults who have lived in the United States for less than a decade were more likely than those who have lived here for a longer time to have completed some schooling before coming to this country.
- On each literacy scale, the average scores of school dropouts in California who had studied for a GED or high school equivalency diploma were at least 65 points higher than those of dropouts who had not participated in such a program. Nearly three-quarters of the GED program participants in California were age 25 or older.
- California residents who were enrolled in school or college at the time of the survey had higher literacy proficiencies, on average, than adults who were not enrolled in an academic program. Nationwide, 38 percent of those enrolled in an academic program reported that their goal was a four-year college degree.
- Eleven percent of the survey respondents in the state said they were currently or previously enrolled in a course to improve their basic skills. There were no significant differences in proficiency between individuals who had enrolled in such a course and those who had not.
- Sixty percent of the adults in California supported the view that employers have an obligation to provide literacy education to employees who need assistance. Their average scores in the assessment were significantly lower than those of respondents who did not share this opinion.

### **Employment, Economic Status, and Civic Responsibility**

- The average literacy proficiencies of full-time employees in California and the nation were equivalent and were significantly lower than those of full-time employees in the West. Part-time workers in California performed as well as their counterparts in the region.
- Full-time and part-time employees in the state performed comparably in the assessment, and on all three literacy scales these employed adults outperformed individuals who were unemployed or out of the labor force.

- California residents who reported being in professional, technical, or managerial positions in their current or most recent jobs had higher average literacy scores than those in other types of occupations, including sales or clerical, craft or service, or labor, assembly, fishing, or farming positions.
- Nearly half the adults in California who were working in labor, assembly, fishing, or farming jobs performed in the lowest level on each literacy scale.
- On each literacy scale, individuals who performed in the higher levels had worked more weeks in the past year, on average, than individuals in the lower levels. California residents with scores in Level 1 reported working an average of only 22 weeks a year, compared with an average of 37 to 46 weeks for adults in the two highest levels.
- Across the scales, California adults with proficiencies in Level 1 reported median weekly earnings of \$235 to \$249. In contrast, those in Level 3 earned approximately \$410 to \$443, and those in Level 4 earned between \$572 and \$576. Similarly, the median annual household income reported by adults in the highest proficiency levels was far higher than that of adults in the lowest levels.
- Eighteen percent of California residents were classified as poor or near poor, based on household size and income. Nearly half of this population demonstrated skills in Level 1 on each literacy scale, while 13 to 15 percent of those who were not poor performed in this level. As a result, the average literacy scores of poor and near poor adults are considerably lower (64 to 73 points) than the scores of adults who were not poor.
- Two-thirds of the eligible voters in California reported having voted in a state or national election in the past five years. On all three scales, the average literacy proficiencies of voters were higher than those of nonvoters.

### **Language Use and Literacy Practices**

- Almost three-quarters of the adults in California (71 percent) reported speaking only English before beginning school, and they tended to perform better in the assessment than adults who reported having learned another language in addition to or instead of English.
- Among California residents who learned a language other than English as children, 51 percent said they usually speak English now, while 41 percent said they usually speak Spanish. Those who usually speak English outperformed those who usually speak another language.
- Most survey respondents in California said they understand (90 percent), speak (89 percent), and read (88 percent) English well or very well; a slightly smaller proportion (84 percent) described themselves as writing it well or very well. In each dimension of literacy, the average scores of adults who said they had limited English literacy skills were considerably (129 to 165 points) lower than those of adults who said they speak, understand, read, or write English well or very well.
- California residents who learned a language other than English before starting school were more likely to say they understand (91 percent) or speak (87 percent) this other language well or very well than to say they read (73 percent) or write (69 percent) it well or very well. Individuals who said they do not read or write their other language well had higher proficiencies in English, on average, than respondents who said they have good skills in their other language.
- Thirty-seven percent of the California residents who learned a language other than English before starting school said they had enrolled in a class to learn to read and write English as a second language. One-third had enrolled in a class to learn to speak and understand English. Those who had completed such courses had higher average proficiencies than those who had not.

- Approximately two-thirds of the adults in California said they grew up in homes that had a range of reading materials. Fifty-three percent said they had been read to as children, and 59 percent reported that their parents or guardians had helped them with schoolwork. Eleven percent of the respondents in the state said they had not received any of these types of early home support for learning and literacy, and their demonstrated proficiencies were lower, on average, than those of adults who had received these types of support.
- Forty percent of the California parents of young children reported reading to their children every day, and another 30 percent said they do so a few times a week. These parents demonstrated significantly higher average literacy proficiencies than the 15 percent of the parents who said they almost never read with their children.
- The vast majority of survey respondents in California reported getting some or a lot of information about current events, public affairs, or government from television or radio. Eighty-two percent said they get much of their information from print media, such as newspapers or magazines. Those who get some or a lot of information from print media earned higher average scores in the assessment than those who do not.
- Forty-five percent of the adults in the state said they read a newspaper every day, and another 37 percent said they do so at least once a week. Ten percent reported never reading a newspaper, and their average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies were far lower than those of newspaper readers.
- Twenty-one percent of the California respondents said they do not read any magazines in English on a regular basis. Their average literacy scores were considerably lower than the scores of those who read at least one or two magazines regularly. Seventeen percent of the adults in the state reported that they had not read any books in English in the past six months, and their scores were considerably lower, on average, than the scores of those who had read at least one book.
- Thirty percent of the adults in California reported that they never use a library, and another 34 percent said they do so only once or twice a year. Conversely, 21 percent said they use a library monthly, 13 percent reported doing so weekly, and 3 percent said they use a library every day. In general, individuals who reported at least occasional use of the library outperformed those who said they never use the library.
- Virtually all California residents said they watch some television every day, although 23 percent said they spend no more than an hour on this activity. Roughly one-quarter of the state's residents (27 percent) reported watching four or more hours of television each day. Individuals who watch the most television had lower average literacy proficiencies than those who watch little or none.
- There are very large differences in average prose proficiency between California residents who read and write prose frequently, either for their personal use or for their jobs, and those who do not. Similarly, the average document proficiencies of individuals who use documents every day are far higher than the scores of individuals who never use these materials. Finally, in the dimension of quantitative literacy, adults who said they frequently use mathematics outperformed those who rarely or never do so.

### **Reflections on the Results**

In reflecting on the results of this study, many readers will undoubtedly seek an answer to a fundamental question: Are the outcomes satisfactory? That is, are the distributions of prose, document, and quantitative proficiency observed in this survey adequate to ensure individual opportunities for all adults, to increase worker productivity, or to strengthen America's competitiveness around the world?

Because it is impossible to say precisely what literacy skills are essential for individuals to succeed in this or any other society, the results of the State and National Adult Literacy Surveys provide no firm

answers to such questions. As the authors examined the survey data and deliberated on the results with members of the advisory committees, however, several observations and concerns emerged.

Perhaps the most salient finding of this study is that surprisingly large percentages of adults performed in the lowest levels (Levels 1 and 2) of prose, document, and quantitative literacy. In and of itself, this may not indicate a serious problem. After all, the majority of adults who demonstrated limited skills described themselves as reading or writing English well, and relatively few said they get a lot of assistance from others in performing everyday literacy tasks. Perhaps these individuals are able to meet most of the literacy demands they encounter currently at work, at home, and in their communities.

Yet, some argue that lower literacy skills mean a lower quality of life and more limited employment opportunities. As noted in a recent report from the American Society for Training and Development, “The association between skills and opportunity for individual Americans is powerful and growing.... Individuals with poor skills do not have much to bargain with; they are condemned to low earnings and limited choices.”<sup>1</sup>

The data from this survey appear to support such views. On each of the literacy scales, adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force demonstrated far more limited skills than those who were employed, and those who earned low wages displayed far lower proficiencies than those who earned high wages. Adults who rarely or never read displayed lower average proficiencies than those who were at least occasional readers. Moreover, the average literacy scores of individuals who received food stamps and who were poor or near poor were much lower than those of their more affluent peers.

Literacy is not the only factor that contributes to how we live our lives, however. Some adults who were out of work or who earned low wages performed relatively well in the assessment, while some full-time workers or adults who earned high wages did relatively poorly. Thus, having advanced literacy skills is not necessarily associated with individual opportunities.

Still, literacy can be thought of as a currency in this society. Just as adults with little money have difficulty meeting their basic needs, those with limited literacy skills are likely to find it more challenging to pursue their goals—whether these involve job advancement, consumer decision making, citizenship, or other aspects of their lives. Even if adults who performed in the lowest literacy levels are not experiencing difficulties at present, they may be at risk as the nation’s economy and social fabric continue to change.

Beyond these personal consequences, what implications are there for society when so many individuals display limited skills? The answer to this question is elusive. Still, it seems apparent that a nation in which large numbers of citizens display limited literacy skills has fewer resources with which to meet its goals and objectives, whether these are social, political, civic, or economic.

If large percentages of adults had to do little more than sign their names on forms or locate single facts in newspapers or tables, then the levels of literacy seen in this survey might not warrant concern. We live in a nation, however, where both the volume and variety of written information are growing and where increasing numbers of citizens are expected to be able to read, understand, and use these materials.

Historians remind us that during the last 200 years, our nation’s literacy skills have increased dramatically in response to new requirements and expanded opportunities for social and economic growth. Today we are a better educated and more literate society than at any time in our history.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there have also been periods of imbalance—times when demands seemed to surpass levels of attainment.

In recent years, our society has grown more technologically advanced, and the roles of formal institutions have expanded. As this has occurred, many have argued that there is a greater need for all individuals to become more literate and for a larger proportion to develop advanced skills.<sup>3</sup> Growing

---

<sup>1</sup> A.J. Carnevale and L.J. Gainer. (1989). *The Learning Enterprise*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

<sup>2</sup> L.C. Stedman and C.F. Kaestle. (1991). “Literacy and Reading Performance in the United States from 1880 to the Present,” in C.F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. T Snyder (ed.). (1993). *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. (1992, April). *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance*. Washington, DC: The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). R.L. Venezky, C.F. Kaestle, and A. Sum. (1987, January). *The Subtle Danger. Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America's Young Adults*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

numbers of individuals are expected to be able to attend to multiple features of information in lengthy and sometimes complex displays, to compare and contrast information, to integrate information from various parts of a text or document, to generate ideas and information based on what they read, and to apply arithmetic operations sequentially to solve a problem.

The results from this and other surveys, however, indicate that many adults do not demonstrate these levels of proficiency. Further, the continuing process of demographic, social, and economic change within this country could lead to a more divided society along both racial and socioeconomic lines.

Already there is evidence of a widening division. According to the report *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!*, over the past 15 years the gap in earnings between professionals and clerical workers has grown from 47 to 86 percent, while the gap between white collar workers and skilled tradespeople has risen from 2 to 37 percent. At the same time, earnings for college educated males 24 to 34 years of age have increased by 10 percent, while earnings for those with high school diplomas have declined by 9 percent. Moreover, the poverty rate for African American families is nearly three times that for White families.<sup>4</sup> One child in five is born into poverty, and for minority populations this rate approaches one in two.

In 1990, President Bush and the nation's governors, including Governor Clinton, adopted the goal that all of America's adults be literate by the year 2000. The responsibility for meeting this objective must, in the end, be shared among individuals, groups, and organizations throughout our society. Programs that serve adult learners cannot be expected to solve the literacy problem alone, and neither can the schools. Other institutions—ranging from the largest and most complex government agency, to large and small businesses, to the family—all have a role to play in ensuring that adults who need or wish to improve their literacy skills have the opportunity to do so. It is also important that individuals themselves come to realize the value of literacy in their lives and to recognize the benefits associated with having better skills. Only then will more adults in this nation develop the literacy resources they need to function in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential.

---

<sup>4</sup> National Center on Education and the Economy. (1990, June). *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages! The Report of The Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*, p. 20.